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Warning and Planning: Learning to Live With Ambiguity

Core Course 5 Essay

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Course 5 Military Strategy and Operations
Seminar F
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The success or failure of military enterprises is often attributed to surprise. Surprise, in turn, is characterized as the result of intelligence failure, specifically, a failure of "warning." This common perception perpetuates the myth that where surprise attacks occur, there is by definition an absence of warning. In fact, one is hard pressed to cite in past decades a military attack that took place with no warning whatsoever--a true "bolt from the blue." Most attacks that have achieved tactical surprise have taken place in an atmosphere of strategic warning, the result of detection and evaluation of some discernible, discrete turn of events that has created or raised tension between attacker and victim. In fact, more ironic is that so much surprise has been achieved in spite of warning.

Warning and Response

Warning is a process, not an event. As Richard Betts has noted, it is part of a continuum that starts with intelligence detection, runs through evaluation and warning to end with decision and response.¹ Warning begins with the detection of some environmental change that suggests the potential for increased threat to US interests or forces in

some region of the world. An initial warning--a strategic warning--may be issued to highlight that potential. As events play out under increased intelligence scrutiny, repeated warnings may be issued as indications accumulate and are evaluated. In most situations, detected indicators will be contradictory: some will bolster the sense of danger; others will tend to refute it. Depending on the evaluation of indicators and on the ratio of corroborating to contradictory indicators, warnings may be "sharpened;" that is, increased confidence in the judgment of a specific intention to harm US interests over more benign alternative explanations may be bolstered, and that confidence will be conveyed to commanders and decisionmakers.

To be successful, warning must prompt an appropriate and timely response, without which it is useless. Exploiting available warning to best advantage depends as much on the timing and nature of that response as it does on the perspicacity and insight with which indicators are evaluated. In practice, a decision to act in response to intelligence warnings is not a simple matter of accepting and acting on whatever judgment intelligence offers, but more often involves the commander's/decisionmaker's own assessment, with subsequent discussion and debate involving commanders/decisionmakers and intelligence professionals.

"Unambiguous Warning"

The concept of warning currently associated with deliberate planning as practiced today by the United States undermines the fundamental notion of warning as a process. Moreover, it risks repetition of the phenomenon of surprise despite warning. In the timelines of their plans, commanders are led to expect a specific amount of "warning time." This "warning time" is defined as the elapsed time between two events: the "d-day" launching of the enemy attack and a preceding event labeled "unambiguous warning" (or sometimes "actionable warning") of the enemy's intention to do so. This concept of "unambiguous" or "actionable" warning as a specific event in the timetable of an operational plan is a dangerous one that can lead, at best, to unwarranted confidence in the preparedness of a force or, at worst, to failure to respond appropriately in a crisis.

The notion of unambiguous warning assumes that detected indicators will reach the necessary degree of persuasiveness of an enemy's intentions at a point in the plan's timeline that will leave the commander enough time to exercise his deterrent or defensive options before the enemy can complete his attack preparations and launch the attack. The timelines may be so tight that success of the overall plan depends on specific action--typically mobilization and deployment--being taken at the prescribed point in time in response to the anticipated "unambiguous warning."

"Actionable" or "unambiguous" warning depends fundamentally on action being taken by a commander or decisionmaker. Indeed, according to the definition offered by the Joint Staff Officer's Guide, "Unambiguous warning occurs when the President decides, based on intelligence he receives, that a hostile government has decided to initiate hostilities."² In other words, "unambiguous warning" is defined in the first instance less on the basis of the inherent content of the warning itself, but rather on the response to it. Unfortunately, this concept of "actionable warning" relies on an expectation that a political decisionmaker will be willing either to take the warning judgment on faith, or that he will--upon examination--share the same view of the unambiguous nature of the evidence on which the warning was issued. Further, it depends on an expectation that the decisionmaker will be willing at that point to order action that is (a) not without cost--economic, political, and diplomatic--and (b) in itself possibly provocative enough prematurely to raise a crisis to a higher level of danger.

In most scenarios, expecting resolution of ambiguity as a condition of response probably is too high a standard. Although indicators may accumulate, enough are likely to be contradictory to prevent absolute confidence in their interpretation. Both commanders and intelligence officers

should recognize this reality, embrace ambiguity, and learn to work within it to reduce risk.

Flexible Deterrent Options

Flexible Deterrent Options (FDOs) were meant in part to address the problem of response and provocation in an atmosphere of ambiguity. FDOs currently seem most often to be characterized as instruments of deterrence. For example, the Joint Staff Officer's Guide describes FDOs as "deterrence-oriented." According to the Guide, "Military FDOs are intended to be used in concert with diplomatic, economic, and political options to give the NCA [National Command Authority] a wide array of deterrent options integrating all elements of national power."³ As originally conceived, however, some FDOs were intended also as a means to advance mobilization and deployment in the least provocative way. Many FDOs amounted to steps that would shorten mobilization and deployment times should full mobilization and deployment subsequently be ordered--in effect, "getting ready to get ready." For example, FDOs that involved such actions as moving or preparing to move materiel and/or forces from garrisons to ports within the United States were designed to cut some time off what would be required for deployment to Europe, should a subsequent decision be made to execute full mobilization and deployment. Some illustrative FDOs of this type, as outlined in the Joint Staff Officer's Guide, include:

- Prestaging sealift and airlift reception assets to air and sea ports of embarkation
- Beginning to move forces to air and sea ports of embarkation.
- Activating procedures to begin reserve callup.
- Opening pre-positioned stockage facilities.
- Ordering contingency forces to initiate actions to deploy.⁴

Responsibilities of Commanders and Intelligence Officers

Making the best use of warning intelligence requires that intelligence officers and commanders share the same concept of the relationship of warning to response. If the commander's expectations differ from those of the intelligence officer, warning will not be exploited to best advantage.

The intelligence officer's role is to keep the commander informed along the continuum of warning and response and to advise him of changes in the warning picture. The intelligence officer's knowledge is never perfect. If it appears so, both the intelligence officer and the commander should be skeptical. Apparently perfect,

or unambiguous, intelligence is likely to come from a single source, dependence on which is always dangerous.

In describing the nature of warning indicators and his evaluation of them, the intelligence officer should sensitize the commander to the difference between corroboration and confirmation. Too often the former masquerades as the latter. Corroboration simply means a second source has provided essentially the same information as a first source (with the assumption that the two are truly separate sources that are not relying on the same tertiary source). Confirmation implies something much more concrete, perhaps corroboration from a source of intelligence in which high confidence is placed, either on the basis of reliable past performance or on some technical characteristic that is thought to defy deception.

A Command/Intelligence Partnership

To make the warning/response continuum work to their advantage, the intelligence officer and commander must form a partnership. Both the intelligence officer and the commander should be prepared to acknowledge and cope with ambiguity. The commander should not be led by an expectation of absolute "unambiguous warning," but should be in continuous close consultation with his intelligence officer to "manage" the ambiguity of their situation.

It is the intelligence officer's job to convey ahead of time a sense of the kind of information he is likely to be able to discern as indicators of enemy intent, as well as the likely ambiguous nature of the warnings he will be able to provide; thus, the commander will not be misled about the basis he will have for decision, so that his plan can encompass contingent, or hedging, steps such as FEOs. The intelligence officer must convey to the commander the degree of uncertainty associated with his judgments. He must also detail alternative explanations for indicators he has perceived, together with the extent to which they are supported or refuted by other evidence. The intelligence officer must be candid in responding to the commanders' concerns and questions.

Joint Staff Publication 2-0, Joint Doctrine for Intelligence Support to Operations, is somewhat schizophrenic on the subject of the intelligence officer's responsibilities in support of the commander. At one point, it prescribes that "Intelligence provided to the commander must be clear, brief, relevant, and timely."⁵ At another point, it declares that "JFCs [Joint Force Commanders] deserve an up-front dialog in which uncertainties are acknowledged and possible alternative explanations are discussed along with an assessment of currently assigned probabilities;" that intelligence officers "should keep alive any hypothesis that could prove viable."⁶ It is

something of a stretch to see these passages as synonymous. The former reads as though it were written by a commander, the latter by an intelligence officer.

Psychological Differences

How well the intelligence officer and the commander play their respective roles depends on their mutual understanding of their different responsibilities; ultimately, success comes down to individuals and their personalities. The commander and his intelligence officer may have quite different psychological makeups. In general, commanders, on the basis of personality and training, are likely to be characterized by boldness and decisiveness. They are likely to be impatient with ambiguity and to be looking for crisp judgments from their intelligence officers. In contrast, intelligence officers are, by personality and training, more likely to be uncomfortable with absolute judgments, and are more likely to see multiple possibilities and explanations, to be questioning and challenging of what may seem straightforward, obvious explanations. Where the commander sees simplicity and a clear path to action, the intelligence officer may see complexity and a maze of potential obstacles.

One suspects it was something like this kind of psychological difference that Dwight Eisenhower had in mind in expressing skepticism of the suitability of intelligence

officers for command in a 1950 speech to the National War College. In that speech he noted that:

I can conceive of an intelligence officer who has a peculiar quirk which might make him a good intelligence officer but not a good commander. . . . [In contrast] it is hard to find a man who . . . can handle logistics problems . . . who is not a potential commander. He thinks as the commander does. So does a good operations officer; so does a good personnel officer. As to intelligence officers--sometimes they puzzle me. . . . I make that one exception because I do admit that there are certain people who have specific and special qualifications in particular groups that would not necessarily make good commanders.⁷

For his part, the commander should make the intelligence officer an active participant throughout both planning and crisis, not just at the moment of crisis decision. Moreover, it will be the commander's responsibility, on the basis of the intelligence officer's information and advice, to weigh the trade-offs of risk and provocation inherent in executing various responses.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The foregoing suggests several conclusions:

- Warning should be seen as a process, not an event that can be represented as a point on the timeline of an operational plan.
- Warning without response is useless; together they form a continuum.
- Unambiguous warning should not be expected; response to warning should not await the absence of ambiguity.
- Ambiguity will be a fact of future scenarios; it is the responsibility of commanders and intelligence officers to share the burden of managing it.

And some recommendations:

- Commanders should be encouraged to involve their intelligence officers from the outset of planning.
- The ambiguous nature of warning, as well as both the capabilities and limitations of intelligence, should be emphasized to commanders at several stages of their professional military development; for example, at senior service schools, Capstone, and the Flag Officers Warfighting Course.

- Attention should be paid to the development of Flexible Deterrent Options specifically tailored to a variety of different regional scenarios.
- Intelligence officers and commanders should be trained to understand the political, economic, and diplomatic limitations of response to warning.
- Intelligence training should emphasize an understanding of the type and character of the informational needs of operators.
- Both commanders and intelligence officers should be taught, and should exercise, ways to live with and exploit ambiguity.

Notes

¹ Richard K. Betts, Surprise Despite Warning: Why Sudden Attacks Succeed (Washington, D. C.: Brookings, 1981) 552.

² The Joint Staff Officer's Guide 1993 (Norfolk, Va: National Defense University, 1993) 6-13.

³ Guide 6-12.

⁴ Guide 6-16.

⁵ Joint Doctrine for Intelligence Support to Operations (Washington, D. C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1993) III-2.

⁶ Doctrine III-6.

⁷ Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Command in War" (Transcript of a lecture at the National War College, 30 October 1950) 8-9.

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